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Potential role of 3rd parties looms larger

By Don Kirk
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The release of the Rev. Benjamin Weir from captivity in Lebanon dramatizes the potential role of Syria and other countries in winning freedom for "the other six" Americans held by Lebanese terrorists.

The question is what the United States — and possibly Israel — can do to make the hostages' release worthwhile for their captors.

"The Syrians would like to help if they were confident it would help their relations with the United States," said Richard Parker, former ambassador to Lebanon and now editor of the *Middle East Journal*.

The importance of a *quid pro quo* was clear from the timing of Weir's release — several days after the freeing of the last of more than 700 Lebanese Moslems held by Israeli authorities at the Atlit prison camp in northern Israel.

One problem in cutting a deal is that U.S. officials still are not sure who held Weir — or has the others.

Telephone calls from people claiming to represent the Islamic Jihad, or Holy War, remain a mystery. Callers have said the Jihad holds the U.S. hostages but experts are uncertain if it really exists — or is merely a name used by radicals with similar aims.

The hostages are still believed to remain in the Beqaa Valley near Baalbek — largely under Syrian control but partly occupied by the pro-Iranian Hezbollah, or Party of God.

U.S. officials are convinced, though, that neither Syrian President Hafez Assad nor Nabih Berri, leader of the Syrian-backed Shiite Amal militia, favors holding hostages. They have appealed to both for whatever they can do as intermediaries.

"Assad has generally played a helpful role in Lebanon," said State Department spokesman Mike Austrian. The Syrian leader, wielding strong influence among all Lebanese factions, wants the fighting there to die down so Syria, hard hit economically, can resume foreign trade through Beirut.